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THE CHURCH AND FREE ENTERPRISE

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THE CHURCH AND FREE ENTERPRISE

"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

—GALATIANS 5:1

The ninth chapter of Judges relates a story told by Jotham, the son of Gideon, as part of his protest against the aggression of Abimelech, his brother. As a vivid fable dealing with the political carelessness and apathy of good citizens, it is amazingly contemporary in its applications. The trees decided they would elect a king to provide governance in their affairs. They offered the honor to the olive, fig tree, and the vine but met refusal each time on the ground that the sacrifice involved was too great. Their private interests interfered with their acceptance of public responsibility. Chagrined by the default of such distinguished citizens of the tree kingdom they then offered the place to the bramble. The proffer met with instant acceptance. Note, too, that the predatory bramble became king of the trees at the behest of the trees themselves. From then on the bramble took over. For thus it is: when men for economic gain and security surrender their political responsibilities and personal integrity, they end as spiritual slaves amid the piercing and painful brambles of their own neglect.

Today thoughtful men are everywhere proclaiming with a new urgency the present perils to our political and economic freedom. There is need to observe in the contemporary setting the way in which brambles rise to entangling power, and strangling control. It was not the last time in human history that public office and the basic freedoms have gone by default to the unworthy and self-seeking simply because the more capable citizens were too engrossed in their own pursuits to give time and thought to public concerns. The real reason why the trees spurned the kingship was due to the low regard with which they viewed the regulatory functions of government. Lack of appreciation of economic and political liberty protected by good government on one side, plus an oversight of the predatory nature of brambles on the other led finally to their entanglement. The privileges we neglect fall to those whom we scorn. From trees to brambles, that is the order.

The Apostle Paul had with brilliant mind penetrated this inner spiritual issue in all freedoms. To keep his converts from yielding again to the constricting observances of Mosaic regulations, he admonished them to consider the real nature of their freedom that they might obtain a new appreciation of it. The astute Apostle knew that once they comprehended the Christian principle of the sacredness of human personality under the control of the

love of Christ they would never again submit to the yoke of any slavery. So, too, with us in these perilous times when men are surrendering one basic freedom after another in exchange for torturous brambles of enslavement. If we but understood the glorious nature of the freedoms, political and economic, that we possess we should appreciate them enough to assume the responsibilities and make the decisions by which alone they may be maintained.

Today, political insecurity and world revolution center primarily about the world's cry for bread. Two great contending theories of government and economics are arrayed against each other on a world scale. Moreover, criticisms of existing orders of government and economics find sharp cleavages among our own citizenry. Nor has the church itself escaped such divergent points of view. It now confronts the necessity of clarifying its own relation to the economic order just as recently it has clarified its relation to political structures. How shall it approach its task? Certainly not by surrendering its role as interpreter to the brambles of neglect because of preoccupation with lesser issues, or its reluctance to be drawn into a fight between capitalism and communism, or some variety of socialism.

The first need of us all in times like these when we seek to re-examine the bases of our beliefs is for a proper perspective. Economic orders and political structures are always in the process of flux and change. Capitalism is an accretion, the result of long centuries of change and development. It has been one thing in one period, another thing in another period. So it has been with communism, so it is with co-operatives, so it will be with any form of socialism. So it will be with any ideology, system, or order. We need, therefore, most desperately to achieve the calmness of historical perspective in order to escape the panics and confusions of the hour which befog the discussion of controversial subjects. Until we can do this we cannot properly evaluate any order.

As the church comes to deal with the problem of the economic order it must always be concerned more with principles by which the orders are evaluated than with the orders themselves. Bishop Gerald Kennedy gets rapidly and nicely to the very heart of how our personal interests always have a way of influencing our outlook upon any problem we are considering and how, therefore, we need to guard against the bias which springs from our own selfishness. He states, "We are called upon to build the kind of society that recognizes each individual man's worth. We are not to be mere defenders of the way things are. The fearful respect which so many Christians have for the ethics of the established order is a scandal. Christians were never supposed to assume that public opinion is the court of last appeal.

We are supposed to be in the vanguard of those who have caught a vision of a better society, a society that has established justice as its ruling passion." When this becomes the spirit of the church seeking to evaluate existing economic orders, it will doubtless lead to the view that neither capitalism nor communism can be considered as satisfying the ethical requirements of Christianity. The church must give such an interpretation of the Gospel of Christ that it will stand the test of time and of a later historical perspective.

The nature of true freedom is its ability to make individual personality and the welfare of people one by one the measure of all values and the test of every social institution. The greatest possible peril to such freedom is anything which makes the welfare of persons subservient to the welfare of institutions, whether economic, governmental, or ecclesiastical. Because of the God-given autonomy of every soul, conscience is free to regulate its own life. Institutions, including government and economic orders, exist for man, not man for them. Their worth is to be judged by what they do to or for men one by one. Once to appreciate this true nature of freedom is to refuse to submit again to any yoke of slavery.

The role of the church in a free society at this point becomes clear. The church is to be Christ's yard-stick for measuring the ministry of governments and economic orders to human need. It must, therefore, be critical of any social order or economy but become identified with none. It must be in the world but not of it. Structure changes, functioning grows faulty, and sin and greed enter any human system. The greater the entanglement of the church with the existing order it seeks to evaluate by Christ's measure of freedom, the less objective and accurate will be its findings. For example, a church identified with the state provides very little protection for the free conscience seeking to escape from control by the state. For this reason we simply must maintain separation of church and state, even though we must renounce all tax-exemption and similar benefits to do so. Something analogous to this is also true of the Church's relation to the economic order. If ability to meet human need is Christ's test of social institutions, it must be the church's test of social institutions. And the church must remain free to *apply* that test to governments and economic orders.

It is just at this point that so many business men become confused in their thinking and divided in their allegiance. They feel that a church that benefits from the products of an order ought not to criticize the order that makes such benefits possible. The position is emotionalized by such phrases as "biting the hand that feeds you." Meanwhile the great truth of the church's service is overlooked. Objectors to the church's criticism of the

existing order fail to appreciate the church's contribution to that order by helping it to correct those abuses within it which uncorrected would lead to its own destruction. For what fails to meet human need cannot stand. The role of the church in the recovery of the world is not only to give a revelation of what by Christ we are freed from in our own personal rights of man, but also to give a demonstration of what we are freed for by way of ministering to human need. In proportion as that ministry is persuasively and attractively presented we have the only antidote to that totalitarianism which is a reaction from the confusions and failures of democracy.

The church must in essence confront our contemporary economy with this penetrating question: Can it be that the current alternatives to democracy and free enterprise are attractive to so many minds because the people of the world are in a mood to shop about, that they want and are demanding something more than democracy and free enterprise, as they now know it, has offered them? That question will not down too easily by any rhetorical defense of the status quo. Moreover, America's outstanding business leaders themselves are raising that question. Mr. Charles E. Wilson has said, "It is the duty of the American Free Enterprise System to recognize the advent of a new, dangerous era. Our people demand economic freedom and security. If we don't give them their birthright, some other system will attempt the job." No one outside a mental institution can take issue with that. The inability of other systems to deliver on the basis of their extravagant promises is irrelevant to the necessity of free enterprise meeting human needs if it is to endure. If the price of the church's helping it to do so is to criticize some of its present failures, it is not too great a price to pay. It goes without saying that the church should also commend successes as well as point out failures!

It is the business of the church to focus the spotlight of truth upon all systems and upon all orders. It must identify itself only with the truth, with justice, and with freedom for all men, one by one. Its basic task is to be an authority in those spiritual principles and those standards of human freedom and welfare which are to be the goals of our striving. The New Testament provides the church not with a correct economic pattern, but with a true spiritual path or set of principles by which patterns and orders may be constructed to meet the needs of any given time. In its national councils and world deliberations the church is seeking to formulate and enunciate such a set of principles to guide us in our striving.

Free enterprise can never rest on sure foundations until its disadvantages as well as its advantages have alike been examined by all, and a conclusion reached by the majority that its advantages outweigh its disadvantages.

There can be no real faith in any economic order until it has been so carefully examined that its disadvantages are knowingly accepted as a discipline which makes possible its continued benefits. That is, unless one believes in Utopia. Let us assume that few are so naive. Let it be added that the evaluation should be made on the basis of what a system does and not upon what a system promises some time in the future to do for a human society.

The position that the church must not identify itself with any economic system and therefore be free to criticize all economic orders will be unpopular with the conservative who will denounce the church for its failure to defend the status quo. It will be equally unpopular with the liberal who is likely to charge the church with blocking progress as a perfectionist-criticism of a proposed new order. But unless the church retains its liberty to criticize any existing economy, it will not then be able through its criticisms to contribute to the welfare or preservation of that order by helping it to correct its own abuses which uncorrected will lead to its destruction. No economic system which fails to meet basic human needs can endure. Nor does it deserve to! All systems are under the judgments of God. The evils of a perverted collectivism are hardly to be preferred to the evils of unrestricted individualism. But the church need not and must not put its stamp of approval on either. Greed and selfishness are not lovely no matter where they exist.

But in all fairness, let the church verbalize this lesson from our times. Political freedom of a kind that safeguards our spiritual liberties cannot be maintained apart from economic freedom. Democracy is impossible apart from a worthy free enterprise, because coercion, which means slavery, is necessary in a planned economy. A planned economy involves a peril to freedom at the point where coercion must enter to make the plan effective. The "mixed" economy doesn't stay mixed. Planning cannot tolerate an economic freedom inside a planned economy for that invalidates the plan. A plan is no good unless it is followed. To see that it is followed, enforcement is required. With enforcement the Gestapo enters and the freedoms depart.

This brings us to the heart of the matter. If business wishes to recover the integrity of free enterprise, it must not only insist that government put its house in order, but it must also keep its own house clean. One wonders what would happen to modern advertising were it to limit itself to the truth! One wonders what would happen to the lushly financed lobbies maintained by special business interests seeking exemptions from the free competition they verbally champion. One recalls that bribes accepted by a Five Per Center had to be offered by someone! Is he who bribes less guilty

than he who accepts it? And what of exorbitant cost-plus contracts in the time of national peril paid for by taxes levied on one's fellow-citizens? Can business maintain her integrity by sowing seeds of scarcity in soils of human need, dumping out food in the face of the hunger of the world in order to maintain a market? The youth of today can bring a new integrity to the business of tomorrow by a more sincere approach to the motto of "service above self" than is currently exhibited in the streams of commerce. Before all this shall the church remain silent?

The divine changing of human hearts more than the human changing of economic systems is our best hope of deliverance from human selfishness and human greed. A bad order with a good heart is better than a "good" order with a bad heart. The church must strive to promote goodness both in the orders and in the hearts of men. The improvement of any economic order must begin with and issue from the hearts of men. Selfishness and greed with their demands for special privileges are common to all economic systems and the cause of their basic evils. Socialism has not yet confronted society with a demonstration of an order freed from the blights of greed and special privilege. The very desire for the redistribution of wealth may be nothing more than covetousness and economic ignorance. The task of the church is to proclaim alike the punishments and rewards of the judgment of God in a morally reliable universe.

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